

# RETHINKING AND REPOSITIONING THE NIGERIAN EDUCATION SECTOR: CHALLENGES AND IDEAS

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## **Abstract**

*Education is considered to be a key instrument of human and economic transformation in all nations of the world. This fundamental role of education seems to be eluding Nigeria in the face of intractable challenges in the sector. This paper examines some of the daunting problems militating against achieving the objectives of education in Nigeria. These problems range from inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, shortage of qualified personnel, political instability, poor policy formulation and implementation to endemic corruption. The paper recommends that technical and vocational education should be emphasised to make the Nigerian educational system more functional and relevant to the needs and aspirations of her citizens. The massification or expansion of access to education should be supported by adequate funding to enhance accessibility to all school going citizens. All stakeholders in the sector must show sincere concern and commitment in revitalizing and repositioning the Nigerian education sector to stem the drift and decay.*

**Key words:** *education policies, funding, education sector, technical and vocational education, technological needs.*

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## **Introduction**

Nigeria as a developing nation cannot but strive to meet with the fast pace of technological advancement and the challenges of globalization. The various challenges in the educational sector must be tackled head-long if the country must make any headway in economic advancement and sustainable development process.

Highly industrialised nations have at one time or the other identified technical and vocational education as a transformational and key index policy thrust for technological growth, economic performance and general development. The current trends in the Nigerian educational sector portend danger for present and future generations, and as a matter of urgency require serious and concerted efforts by all stakeholders to salvage the system. No sane country can afford to toy with its education and youth development.

Technical and vocational education facilitated rapid development in most countries of the world particularly, the developed countries. No nation can achieve development and advance technologically without trained individuals with relevant skills, knowledge, attitudes and abilities required to build efficient workforce in all sectors of the economy.

In order to revitalize and reposition the Nigerian educational sector it is germane to suggest that emphasis should be placed on sound technical and vocational educational programmes at all levels. The nation needs competent manpower to design and install improved equipment and technically skilled personnel who can help in the production of quality products. Through this development, Nigeria would cease to be a consumer nation and a dumping ground for second-hand goods like cars, computers, clothing materials and equipment rejected by their producers; and therefore, compete favourably in the production and export of products demanded in the developed world. The inability of the education system to produce the needed manpower for the country's technological development is a huge problem. The failure of government to effectively implement educational policies and programmes has degenerated to general apathy in the system.

Fakorede (2013) feels that there is a strong need to invent truly Nigerian technology for the production and consumption of made in Nigeria products, including foods and services that the country would be proud of. Nigeria should not only be able to export her products but should also sell her technological know-how to other countries. Nigerians cannot hope to improve upon their standard of living under the present economic regime that depends greatly on foreign markets.

The education system and curricula should be reviewed to emphasise entrepreneurial orientation in all sectors of the economy to eliminate gross unemployment, youth restiveness, political violence, corruption, poverty and culture of mediocrity in the society. Strategies should be designed to effectively implement entrepreneurship programmes at all levels of our educational system.

## **Relevance of Education**

Education is a principal instrument in social mobility and facilitates reduction in income inequality, health and opportunities inherited from the past. It is used for the consolidation of the democratization process in Nigeria. Education exposes students to the basic political norms and values of the society. This ranges from the principle of free and fair elections to the avoidance of political apathy. The merit of this is the inculcation of patriotism and political consciousness in the students including their obligation, the virtues of discipline, tolerance, justice and so on (Abeshi & Ezondi, 2011:155). Education, therefore, consolidates the forces of national unity and a purposeful national awareness

for economic sustainability. It is also an instrument that yields dividends which transcend mere economic returns. This is because education, especially tertiary education, elevates the quality of life of the recipients; bequeaths individual dignity and self-respect which are the hallmarks of individual freedom. Indeed, the merit of education in this regard is beyond estimation (Patel, 2003).

Education is also paramount to the improvement of people's health conditions. Education, especially women education is connected to child health, nutritional quality, and decline in infant and maternal mortality. It also assists tremendously in the aspect of reproductive health. It further elongates life expectancy due to the consciousness of personal hygiene and dietary values acquired through education. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that the difference of one per cent point in the national literacy rate is associated with two-year gain in life expectancy (Dada & Bazza, 2007). Education contributes to the development of new technologies following researches conducted by universities and other research institutes. Technological development itself equally enriches education. Education and technology are critical factors for economic development. Advances in information technology have aided the accessibility of knowledge, declined the importance of geographical boundaries due to globalization. The intellectual capital has become an instrument of competitive advantage amongst nations and the thinking skill is viewed as a pre-requisite for employment (Isyaku, 2009)

### **Problems Confronting the Nigerian Education Sector**

The position of Prof. Jejel succinctly captures the mind of every analyst of not only Nigerian education but education in all developing countries, particularly in Africa. The challenges confronting the education sector in Nigeria are so enormous that making a successful turn-around in the sector appears magical. It is pertinent to highlight some of these problems before proffering solutions.

### **The State of Higher Education in Nigeria**

Higher education plays a critical role in development, particularly in the global context in which knowledge-based innovations and products fetch high value on the market. Beyond economic benefits, higher education also offers scope for cultural and community development.

### **Unprecedented Growth**

Over the last few decades Nigeria has witnessed tremendous growth in its higher education and research sphere. This is to a large extent a manifestation of the recognition by major stakeholders, including political leaders of the value of higher education in achieving their visions of prosperity, peace and integration. International agencies, once sceptical about the value of university education in Nigeria's socio-economic development are now among the chief advocates of revitalisation of higher education in Nigeria.

### **Lagging Research Capacity**

It has been observed that African countries, including Nigeria spend less than 0.5% of their GDP on research, a level of funding that poses a major challenge to the continent's development. The lack of capacity regarding research and knowledge creation has meant further marginalization. Africa has the world's lowest ratio of researchers per million inhabitants and an average of only 35 scientists and engineers

per one million inhabitants. Its annual share of research publications is less than 1.5%. Many higher education institutions in Nigeria do not yet have adequate research capabilities and their contributions have been found to be less relevant to development needs. Furthermore, the scale of change is inadequate if the Nigerian higher education sector is to compete with those in other parts of the world.

### **Low Quality Outputs**

Challenges in recruiting and retaining faculty staff with senior academic qualifications and research experience, include limited postgraduate opportunities, low graduation rates and discouraging conditions of service. Most institutions have been unable to recruit additional academic staff to cope with increased enrolment figures, either because of shortage of funds or unavailability of qualified candidates. The staff shortages in many Nigerian universities are compounded by the fact that the average age of faculty members is relatively high and are exacerbated by brain drain. The slow expansion of postgraduate education has seriously constrained innovation as most research skills are commonly acquired during masters and doctoral studies. The lack of academic staff with PhDs has adversely affected the quality and depth of the instruction provided to undergraduate students and the ability to provide graduate students with adequate supervision.

### **Supply vs Demand**

A significant increase in student enrolment in Nigerian universities in order to absorb the increasing demand for higher education is fuelled by the massification of primary and secondary education. Private higher education, which accounted for 22% of higher education students on the continent in 2006, is growing faster in many African countries, particularly Nigeria, due in part to major policy reforms carried out by governments. However, the deregulation of the higher education sector has resulted in contradictory outcomes.

The increase in tertiary enrolment in Nigeria has not translated into comparative improvement in employment opportunities. This is partly due to the mismatch between the number and type of graduates and the needs of the labour market. Indeed, there are growing complaints by employers that graduates are poorly prepared for the workplace. Thus there is a triple crisis of graduate unemployment, underemployment and unemployability. Several studies point to a need to match employer requirements and the curriculum developed by higher education institutions.

A number of "centres of excellence" are being established in Africa, notably the AU's Pan-African University (PAU), which promotes cooperation among African countries in targeted areas within specialised regional centres to enhance quality, research, and postgraduate education. A concrete initiative that seeks to nurture quality and exemplify excellence, the PAU is globally competitive and relevant to Africa's need and aspirations. Nigeria can tap into this capacity building centres to reposition the education sector.

### **Commitment**

There is the need for increased commitment on the part of local, state and federal governments and the private sector to invest in higher education, science and technology, research and innovation. Various options need to be explored for developing clear funding mechanisms and policies. These can only be achieved through dialogue. Many processes have not been subjected to continental dialogues involving the majority of stakeholders in the sector who have been demanding a platform for an Africa-wide dialogue to reposition the higher education sector to serve the needs of the continent and

its people. This need is reflected in the lack of coordination among interventions by African governments, private actors and networks, and international development partners resulting in fragmented efforts that reduce impact.

### **Conflict of Ideas**

Despite the instrumental role of education in national development, it is confronted with series of other challenges, one of which is epistemological colonialism. Many developments within Africa have been explained from the perspective of the West. On this note, Ali Mazrui has pointed to the cultural westernization of Africa via the instrumentality of colonization, imperialism and capitalism affecting adversely the education curricula in Africa a number of which are alien construction and incompatible with the African context (Francis, 2009:31).

Indeed, the Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Don McKinnon also expatiated on this when he remarked that, the education system of the Commonwealth nations were formulated in England during the colonial era, and this was inherited by contemporary societies; and that it "is largely western and predominantly English in terms of systems and content, characterised by a high level of elite exchange among European sectors, and a patron-client relationship centralized in Britain, in the African, and to a lesser extent, Caribbean sectors." This is because colonial antecedents including differences in economic prowess or resources had entrenched the scenario of inequality between the erstwhile imperial powers and the colonies. And, despite the fact that most member states of the Commonwealth in Africa, Caribbean and Asia had diversified their educational system in consonance with the patron-client outlook of the colonial era, there are still traces of overwhelming educational underdevelopment and/or imbalance especially for the African members (Agwu, 2004:60) This is compounded by the use of western perspectives to explain developments in Africa with little regard for socio-cultural differences and specificities. For instance, Africa has been misrepresented as a continent characterised by anarchy capable of threatening global peace and security.

### **The Factor of Crisis**

It is undoubtedly true that a number of African countries and regions have experienced conflicts in varying degrees, i.e. in Angola, Rwanda, Burundi, Congo, Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Central African Republic, Cote d'Ivoire and others. In some of these however, relative peace has been obtained. (Adetula, 2009:390 – 391). Nigeria also witnessed a civil war between 1967 and 1970 and is currently experiencing security challenges that involve the use of sophisticated weapons in some sections of the northern part of the country. Check-mating the terrorist activity of Boko Haram in the North-East has been an uphill task for the Nigerian military. Education in this region has largely been dislocated. It is equally valid to note that all over the world and throughout history, no society can assert absolute freedom from incidences of crisis and armed conflicts.

Be that as it may, the question of peace and conflict management could be effectively addressed if Nigerian indigenous knowledge system is maximally tapped and applied for that purpose. Studies have indicated that pre-colonial Africa had developed political, social and economic institutions with effective strategy of conflict resolution and peace creation (Francis, 2009:31) Nevertheless, given the nature of conflicts in Nigeria which in some cases are violent, the role of peace education is critical in enlightening the citizenry of the various ethnic groups on the dynamics of conflicts and/or its devastating consequences thus, the imbibing of peace making skills that will assist to reduce albeit

effectively the tides of violent conflicts in the country. Societal ills such as injustice, oppression, discrimination based on gender categorization, race differentiation, ethnicity, religious bigotry, marginalization resulting in the pauperization of a section of the masses, prejudices, political domination by a particular ethnic extraction and so on, contribute to the eruption of crisis in the society.

No doubt currently, peace studies have assumed a multi-disciplinary dimension drawing contributions from political science, law, international relations, developmental studies, sociology, history, economics, and social psychology, but this can only be meaningful and result oriented when analysis and perspectives are situated within the Nigerian context. However, the curricula at the various levels of education should not only reflect the Nigerian reality but also global issues and debates that challenge Nigeria. When this is established, peace education will inculcate the right culture of peace in the people through scientific and ethical values. It will focus peoples' attention on the need to respect human life, dignity and rights, pursue social justice, ensure equity in the distribution of national wealth and power, the eradication of gender inequalities (Gumut, 2009:165-166) for the promotion of regional, continental and global peace.

### **Inadequate Funding**

Another problem militating against the educational sector is the issue of funding. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)- has been involved in the sponsoring of various projects around the globe such as international science programmes, literacy, technical and teacher training programmes, projects dealing with regional and cultural history, and also enters international co-operation agreements not only on the preservation of human rights but also the securing and preservation of world cultural and national heritage, given its experience in educational matters, fixed the bench mark for the funding of a nation's educational sector to not less than 26% of the annual national budget (Agwu, 2004:62). Yet, most countries including Nigeria have not fully implemented this, causing educational underdevelopment in the different levels of the educational system. Indeed, available evidence indicates that between 1997 and 2000, Federal Government gross expenditure on education was below 10%. (Igbuzor, 2009:75).

The history of low educational funding in Nigeria is traceable to the early 1980s with the decline in crude oil prices at the international market resulting in dwindling revenue to the national treasury. This, coupled with the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), further led to government cut on expenditure including that of the educational sector. All these culminated in the nonpayment of teachers' salaries, deterioration of educational facilities and infrastructure, industrial actions by teachers/lecturers, e.t.c, adversely affecting the educational sector. Indeed, in the 21st century, underfunding is equally partly responsible for the series of industrial actions/strikes embarked upon by teachers/lecturers over time. University lecturers nationwide recently embarked on strike as a result of the funding question and inadequate infrastructures in the universities amongst others.

### **The Menace of Corruption**

Corruption is yet another factor that hampers the implementation and attainment of educational goals in Nigeria. In some cases funds that were supposed to have been spent on the educational sector by stakeholders in the ministry are siphoned. Also, internally generated revenue is being misappropriated by school administrators. Further

manifestation of corruption could be seen in the lack of provision of adequate data that would facilitate objective educational planning and decision making. Sometimes funds meant for educational development are sunk into political campaigns for the pursuit of personal ambition (Danladi, 2006:189). A situation where funds for the provision of basic educational infrastructure and facilities are diverted to some personal ventures, libraries are rarely stocked with the modern relevant literature/books/research works. The implication of this is the abysmal decline in the standard of education noticed in the educational system.

### **Universal Basic Education**

The sustainability of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) is a pre-requisite for ensuring educational revolution in Nigeria. But despite its emphasis on free and compulsory education for all Nigerian children in the Primary and Junior Secondary levels, the programme is confronted with some challenges which tend to limit its success. These constraints as succinctly highlighted by Chidi (2006:405-406) include inadequate funding, irregular payment of teachers' remuneration, limited allocation of time for the planning of the programme, inaccurate statistics, ignorance of the value of education by some parents, employment of non-professionals into the educational system, lack of school facilities and basic infrastructures, failure to up-grade school curriculum in line with modern developments and changes to make it consistent to societal needs, high rate of school drop outs, policy discontinuities due to political changes and so on.

### **Conclusion**

Sustainable development in a nation's economy can only be achieved if the education system is properly positioned to develop the manpower and capacity for exponential growth. The fundamental role of education as an instrument of human transformation and structural development requires huge financial and intellectual investment for efficient and effective management of the system. Governments and other stakeholders must ensure that all factors militating against positive policy formulation and implementation are properly addressed and education made accessible to all deserving citizens.

The challenges of inadequate funding, pressure of demand, paucity of trained academic staff, corruption and mismanagement must be tackled with utmost sense of sincerity to achieve the fundamental objectives of education. Tertiary education particularly, must be made to solve the social and technological needs of the society. Curricula at all levels of education should be reviewed to emphasize technical and vocational education and engender orientation towards entrepreneurial attitude. Functional education definitely would reduce the high rate of unemployment, crime and criminality, terrorism and insurgency and political instability.

### **Recommendations**

Stakeholders interested in salvaging the educational system in Nigeria should critically consider the following recommendations:

#### **i. From Growth to Massification**

Nigeria's exponential population growth demands massive expansion of higher education. At a minimum, Nigeria needs to reach world average enrolments by 2050 which will entail growing even faster than the rest of the world. Along with this, strides should be made to ensure gender parity in tertiary enrolments within the

decade. Massification must be followed by investments in academic staff, infrastructure, library facilities, laboratories, and the like. Without it education would be shoddy and of low quality which will be a disservice to students, the economy and society.

## **ii. Improving Financing and Management**

The expansion and provision of quality higher education will require proportionally higher, sustainable, and predictable levels of public funding. For example, using a special value-added tax, Ghana established the Education Trust Fund to increase support for education at all levels, especially the tertiary level. Nigeria has its own version in Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) which to some extent oversees staff training, research and structural development of higher institutions in Nigeria. Other options could include cost sharing policies, national loan schemes or undertaking entrepreneurial activities, which is also becoming increasingly common. These activities range from promoting commissioned research and faculty consultancies to establishing revenue-generating enterprises including technology firms, agricultural farms, and operating hotels, bookstores, cafeterias, and facility rentals.

To reduce costs, many institutions are outsourcing services including students' accommodation and catering. Other cost-saving measures include diversifying modes of instructional delivery through distance and virtual education.

The culture of fundraising needs to be strengthened through the establishment of endowments and development foundations. It entails cultivating alumni, engaging local and multinational businesses, and attracting foreign donor support. A potential source of support that needs to be mobilized is the diaspora academic community.

In addition to diversifying their revenue streams, financial challenges facing higher education institutions require the adoption of more sophisticated and transparent budgeting models to ensure efficient utilisation of limited resources.

## **iii. Articulation, Harmonisation and Quality Assurance**

Nigeria needs well-articulated, diversified, and differentiated higher education system. The country has to have highly ranked global universities if it is to compete in the rapidly growing and lucrative international higher education market and become a serious player in research and innovation.

Higher education institutions must embrace differentiation. This entails accepting the fact that not all universities should be research universities. Articulation entails the need for harmonisation and the creation of quality assurance agencies at the continental, regional, national, and institutional levels. This is often hampered by lack of financial and human resources, and legislative bottlenecks.

Higher education institutions need to develop more robust, transparent, and fair systems of assessment to measure their effectiveness for continuous improvement. This includes evaluation of student learning outcomes, academic staff, and institutional performance.

## **iv. Institutional Autonomy and Governance**

The public interest and investment in higher education does not entail state interference into university affairs, which has had adverse consequences for the higher education project. Similarly, institutional success and sustainability is not a monopoly of management but involves staff and students.



Developing robust systems and processes of shared governance is imperative for institutions of higher education to navigate challenges and seize opportunities. But, academic freedom must be respected and upheld by both the state and university leaders as a cornerstone to sustain vibrant higher education institutions and the cultures of intellectual inquiry and innovation so essential for a democratic society and economic development.

#### v. **Enhancing Research and Innovation**

If research is to be transformative and contribute to Nigeria's sustainable development, it must be vigorously supported through higher levels of funding and enabling policies. It also needs to become more locally embedded by addressing Africa's realities and challenges. African countries and universities need to vigorously promote intra-continental and inter-continental research partnerships and collaborations, and share information and best practices.

Nigerian universities must promote coordinated research systems, increase investment in research and development, and enhance their innovation and competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. Emerging foundations and the Nigerian private sector must also be encouraged and incentivised to invest more in research and development in partnership with higher education institutions.

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